



# News

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## **IDEM urges schools to get rid of mercury before law bans it from classrooms**

The Indiana Department of Environmental Management is encouraging Indiana educators to conduct a mercury inventory in their schools and address necessary recycling or disposal measures before a new law restricting the possession and purchase of the toxic element goes into effect this summer.

House Enrolled Act 1901, stipulates that on July 1, 2003, “no public or nonpublic Indiana school may use or purchase for use in a primary or secondary classroom a mercury commodity, mercury compounds or mercury-added instructional equipment and materials, except measuring devices and thermometers for which no adequate substitute exists for use in laboratories.”

IDEM Commissioner Lori F. Kaplan and Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction Suellen Reed recently sent letters to all Indiana schools outlining the hazards of mercury exposure in children, explaining the provisions of HEA 1901 and encouraging use of the state-funded recycling and disposal programs.

“The time to think about recycling and disposal is not after a spill happens where students become unnecessarily exposed to mercury contamination, it’s before that emergency situation develops,” said Kaplan. “Unfortunately, it’s all too common that our emergency responders are called to a school because mercury has been carelessly handled by teachers or by students.”

Mercury-containing items targeted for restriction in schools include (but are not limited to) thermometers, barometers and some laboratory and medicinal chemicals. While permitted in buildings for structural functionality, other mercury-added instruments such as thermostats and gauges, electrical switches and relays, mercury-vapor lamps, fluorescent bulbs, batteries and paint could be considered unlawful if used as instructional aids where intended or accidental direct exposure of mercury to students is possible. The most common areas for mercury products in schools are science classrooms and labs and nursing stations.

Because eliminating mercury from schools can prevent spills and save thousands of dollars in cleanup costs, IDEM is offering to help schools beat the ban. Last month, IDEM awarded more than \$140,000 in grants to five Indiana solid waste management districts (SWMD) and to the city of Indianapolis. The six recipients are to serve as mercury collection and storage “hubs” for all solid waste districts throughout the state. The facilities are required by state law to ensure proper recycling or final disposal by a qualified contractor as sufficient quantities of mercury are gathered.

Schools who participate in IDEM’s Mercury Reduction and Recycling for Schools Pledge Program are eligible for a 75 percent reduction in costs associated with packing, transporting and recycling mercury through SWMD grant dollars. The department also highlights participating schools in its public outreach materials and through the IDEM Web site as positive environmental contributors.

Since 1998, through the Mercury Awareness Program (MAP), IDEM and its SWMD and city partners have reduced the amount of mercury in all 92 counties and have collected and properly disposed of more than 8,000 mercury thermometers from Hoosier residences and businesses. To date, only 90 of Indiana’s 2,841

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schools have taken the mercury pledge. IDEM will be encouraging more schools to take the pledge as the new law's effective date draws near

Consider these mercury facts:

- Mercury poisoning damages the human brain, spinal cord, kidneys and liver.
- Long-term exposure to mercury can result in personality changes, stupor and coma.
- Children are more prone to mercury poisoning than adults due to an underdeveloped brain and central nervous system barrier protecting them from exposure to neurotoxins.
- A large laboratory thermometer can contain up to 3.0 grams of mercury. While equivalent to only 1/25 of a teaspoon, this amount is enough to contaminate a 60-acre lake.

For complete information on mercury and IDEM's assistance programs, visit [www.in.gov/idem/mercury](http://www.in.gov/idem/mercury)